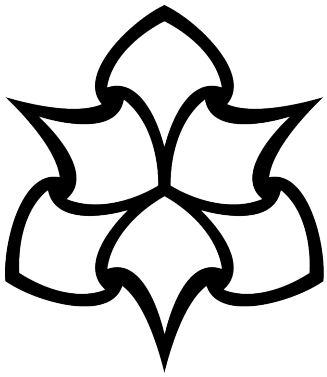

Running Head: *WOMEN GAMERS' AVATAR CHOICES*

"I don't want my character to be a fairy princess": Qualitative accounts of women gamers' avatar choices

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"I don't want my character to be a fairy princess": Qualitative accounts of female gamers' avatar choices

Abstract

The ease with which we can now create digital selves means that virtual environments such as video games can be playgrounds for experimenting with alternative identities. Extensive experimental research exists examining what determines our virtual selves' (avatar's) appearance and impact, but relatively few studies addresses this in detail using qualitative methods. There is also very little research which focuses specifically on female gamers and how they may experience avatar choices, which is especially important given the hostile environment they may face in public gaming spaces. The present study aimed to examine avatar decisions of women gamers with the use of semi-structured gaming interviews, where participants were interviewed while creating an avatar in a popular action adventure game. The data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis and three themes were extracted. The women interviewed expressed frustration having to "*pretend to be a guy*" due to lack of choice and motivation to avoid harassment online. However, when discussing environments where they were free to customise their character, participants both adhered to prescriptive norms for women to avoid being a "*bigger girl*", while rejecting traditionally feminine appearance to avoid being "*a stereotype*". Findings show that despite using avatars to be someone else, the women were often constrained in their choices by the male-centric context of gaming, and reactions to this context which involved eschewing femininity in their avatar choices.

Key words: qualitative research, video games, women, avatars

The term 'avatar' refers to digital presentations of video game players or participants in virtual spaces (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). There has recently been a surge in research exploring avatars used in video gaming and how their appearance might influence the player or vice versa, however, much of the research is laboratory-based, asking participants to choose avatars while removed from their usual gaming environments. Very little qualitative work has examined this potentially complex two-way relationship between player and avatar which may be especially important for women given that women are subject to more gendered harassment than men in contexts where they may use avatars to present themselves. The current study therefore aims to explore in depth the factors affecting avatar appearance choices for women who identify themselves as gamers.

Avatar choices in digital games

Though there is disagreement on a definition of avatars, the current study will utilise Bailenson et al.'s (2005, p.72) definition as "digital representations of humans that are utilized in immersive virtual environments". Avatars can have a significant effect on the degree of immersion players experience, or in other words the extent to which participants feel they have been transported into the game world (Murray, 1998). The impact of avatars on immersion may be influenced by the relationship between the avatar and player movements (e.g. playing on a console versus three-dimensional virtual reality; McMahon, 2003) and by the degree of customisation allowed in the specific game. However, when avatars are used in online play contexts involving others, avatars cease to be merely a representation of a player's movements; they facilitate interaction with others and can be a device via which we communicate a version of ourselves.

Avatars can be used in many ways to achieve goals within game worlds. For example, in a study by Vasalou and Joinson (2009), different groups of participants were instructed to create avatars with varying goals. Avatars created for 'blogging' were the most similar in appearance to the participant creating them. For instance, while avatars created for 'dating'

were more attractive, those for 'gaming' were rated more intellectual. This suggests that even in an artificial laboratory setting, avatars are goal-directed.

Players may also compensate for perceived 'real life' flaws by constructing a desired avatar identity. Men with weight and muscle concerns were found by Cacioli and Mussap (2014) to create avatars which are closer to their ideal body size than their real body, and men and women tend to choose avatars which are consistent with Western standards of ideal male and female bodies (Dunn & Guadagno, 2012). Yee and Bailenson (2007) suggest that constructing a desirable virtual representation has the potential to elicit desirable behaviour from other players (when playing online) and *from the player themselves*, even when playing alone, via what they term the 'proteus effect'. They propose that avatar identity can impact on player behaviour in the same way outlined by self-perception theory (Bem 1972). Self-perception theory proposes that we observe our behaviour in order to learn about our attitudes. Yee and Bailenson build on this idea to argue that players use avatars as identity cues and then exhibit the behaviour expected from that type of avatar, which may result in more satisfactory interactions with others when playing (either other players online or in-game characters).

Many players may therefore have a range of avatars, even within a single game, that they use for playing the game in different ways and with different audiences in order to capitalise on these opportunities. Gilbert et al., (2014) propose that though it may sometimes be important for the avatar to represent a consistent identity for players to be identified by others, 'alts' (alternative avatar identities) may also be used for practical and strategic reasons, or for what Taylor (2002, p58) calls "identity tourism". Depending on the game, players may have a wide range of avatar types to choose from and may do so strategically to optimise game experience.

Constraints on avatar choice

Though avatars offer the choice to perform whatever identity the player chooses, the extent to which this is a *free* choice is limited by several factors. Some games may offer more choice than others and where there is no choice of avatar, designers tend to default to male (Burgess et al., 2007) and White (Dietrich, 2013) protagonists. Where there are choices these are again determined by designers who, especially in mainstream games, tend to be male, white and heterosexual (International Games Developers Association, 2017). The choices available therefore reflect the social and cultural context in which the games are developed and marketed.

Self-expression in games by minority groups may be limited not only by design choices but also by the specific social landscape of gaming culture. Women, for example, must be cautious in how they present themselves in online gaming spaces because being identified as a female player results in an increased level of gendered harassment such as the use of gendered slurs like 'whore' and 'slut' and violent threats of gendered violence such as rape (Fox & Tang, 2017). Avatar choice is one part of self-presentation in this context, along with username choice (Cote, 2017) and features of language used in chat (Herring & Stoerger, 2013).

Where women do choose female avatars, their virtual choices are often constrained by general stereotypes which restrict women outside of the game. Even in games with highly customisable avatars, female players' choices are made in a wider societal context where women are constantly bombarded with idealised images of thin, large-breasted figures (Grogan, 2016) and are subject to extensive and pervasive surveillance of their bodies (Dakanalis & Riva, 2013). Developer-chosen figures of female characters reproduce these conditions with research demonstrating that figures of female avatars tend to adhere to unrealistic Western beauty standards prescribing thinness (Martins et al., 2009) and tend be sexualised with large breasts and revealing clothing (Williams et al., 2009). Even where

women have more choice about their avatar's appearance, adolescent girls, for example, have been found to focus more on the presence and size of female-specific sexual characteristics than boys do on equivalent male characteristics (Villani et al., 2012).

The tendency of avatars to replicate idealised and sexualised images of women's bodies from Western media has negative consequences. Players of any gender choosing a female character are more likely to show passive behaviour in-game (Eastin, 2006) and show more negative attitudes towards women, and greater rape myth acceptance (Fox et al., 2009). Women, in particular, who choose female characters experience reduced self-efficacy (the belief in one's own capacity for success) (Behm-Morowitz & Mastro, 2009), poorer performance on maths tasks (Ratan & Sah, 2015), increased self-objectification and thoughts about the body (Fox et al., 2013) and poorer game performance due to an internalisation of a 'girls can't play' stereotype (Kaye & Pennington, 2016).

The present study

Though there has been extensive research on the construction and consequences of virtual identities, very little research specifically examines the virtual characters of women players, despite evidence suggesting that their experiences and choices may be very different to male players. Ethnographic research on gender and gaming so far suggests that avatar choice for gamers which do not fit the White, male gamer stereotype is complex and multi-faceted (Shaw 2014) and determined by many factors within and beyond the game (Sunden & Sveningsson, 2012). The current research aims to build on existing qualitative work by focusing on women's avatar appearance choices to explore how this may be affected by the context in which women game and how this might be linked to broader social constructions of women's appearance.

Method

Participants

Opportunity sampling was used to recruit nine women aged 18-39 years who stated that they play video games. Participants were recruited using an advertisement specifically for [self-identified] gamers on a local bulletin website, as well as the psychology department's online participation pool. The term 'gamer' is not always claimed by those who play video games, and women and players from minority groups in particular may be unwilling to claim it (Shaw, 2012), however the advertisement for this study requested 'female gamers' so we can assume that the participants were willing to claim that identity to some extent.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted while participants constructed an avatar on the popular role-playing game *Fallout 4*. Participants were instructed to build any avatar they wished and were audio recorded talking through their usual process of building avatars in games where customisation was possible, while making choices about the avatar's facial features, skin tone, hair type/colour and body size/type.

Fallout 4 was chosen because it provides an extensive range of customisation for males and females (with the same features, body types etc available for both) as well as flexibility for body type along two continuous dimensions: muscularity and size. The use of an in-game context to guide the interview benefits from advantages of using 'photo-led interviews' such as being more participant-led than a traditional semi-structured interview (Bates et al., 2017) and helping participants connect with visual aspects of the environment being discussed (here it is the virtual in-game environment). Participants were then asked additional questions probing their choices, and more generally how they

experienced avatar customisation in their gameplay. This portion of the interview focused on topics such as identification, immersion and game enjoyment, but relied on participants' common-sense definitions of these concepts.

Data Analysis

The research took feminist standpoint in relation to the data (Gergen, 2010), meaning that the researchers aimed to give female gamers a voice in how they experienced choosing and inhabiting avatars in the given social and cultural context. The data was analysed from a critical realist stance in that we acknowledge the difficulty of accessing the reality of these gamers' experiences and the researchers' role in interpretation of participants' reality as they express it (Terry et al., 2017). It is useful to highlight here that both of the researchers consider themselves women gamers. The first author is in her 20s and has been gaming for 5 years and plays mostly online. The second author is a female social psychologist in her 30s with an interest in gender and body image who has been gaming since adolescence and mainly plays offline.

These characteristics enabled the researchers to better understand the accounts of the participants due to their familiarity with the games and characters they talked about. In addition, women who raise issues related to gender are often silenced by (usually) male players (Sunden & Sveningsson, 2012); being interviewed by a female gamer may have reassured participants that accounts of male-centric gaming environments would be listened to. Generally, we attempted to, as Berger (2013) suggests, use our experiences as a lens through which to view the data, but avoid projecting our own experiences on to participants. We feel that adopting this approach helped us to balance the pitfalls of insider research with the benefits of our knowledge of gaming contexts.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data following the steps identified in Terry et al. (2017). There are few existing studies exploring avatar identification in women; as

such, it was necessary to use an inductive method to derive the codes and themes directly from the text. This flexible method can generate unanticipated insights, providing a rich and detailed explanation of the data through careful repeated reading, allowing researchers to explore any concepts that arise within their transcripts in depth.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the departmental ethics committee and followed University governance on ethics and research integrity. Data collection and management followed broad principles outlined in the British Psychological Society's Code of Conduct (respect, competence, responsibility, integrity; BPS, 2009) as well as specific guidelines on informed consent, right to withdrawal, confidentiality and thorough debriefing. Participants chose their own pseudonyms and these were used throughout the coding and analysis processes.

Analysis

Avatars were talked about as an avenue for escape from reality, and a chance to be someone else, but the women interviewed also revealed ways in which their control over their avatars' appearance was limited. They expressed the constraints placed on them by games developers and hostile online gaming contexts as determining their options for avatar gender, and their 'choices' were also influenced by their wish to both conform to and distance themselves from norms for female appearance existing outside of the game world.

Theme 1: "Pretending to be guys" (Billi)

When talking about their usual avatar choices, participants confirmed research findings (e.g. Martins et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2009) which suggest that playable characters for offline games were often male.

> *We're so used to seeing men as the main… the only playable gender.* (Amelia)

> *I do a lot of sort of, game play rather than playing online. And like, you're forced to play as mainly a man most of the time.* (Lauren)

Amelia uses the phrase "so used to" to include herself in a group of female players who are no longer being surprised at usually having to play as male characters, or at the lack of representation allowed them by games developers. Lauren refers explicitly to the lack of choice afforded to women when choosing their avatar gender by acknowledging that they are often "forced" to play as an avatar they would not otherwise choose.

Imogen also expresses frustration about having to play as a man and situates this restriction in a wider context where games development is male-dominated:

> *If I have to be a male character, it does bother me, and it can sometimes put me off… playing the game, even, erm… partly because I find it hard to identify with the character but partly because it bothers me that the games industry, historically, has preferred men a lot of the time and that winds me up.* (Imogen)

Imogen's location of the problem in the historical domination of the games industry by men moves the issue beyond individual frustrations (such as lack of identification with the character) to wider structural problems with who holds the power to make decisions about how games are made. The source of this frustration is confirmed by recent statistics showing that men make up 74 per cent of developers surveyed by the International Games Developers Association (2017).

Male domination of online gaming spaces was also cited as a factor which may determine avatar choices during online play:

> *You'll get more females pretending to be guys so that they'll be more accepted.* (Billi)
>
> *I've spoken to women who pick male avatars in online games to avoid abuse, which is quite sad, but it seems to be a thing that happens. Erm… because some*

> *people have said that they do find they get treated differently, especially in more social games where there's more verbal interaction with the other people.*
>
> (Imogen)

These two extracts demonstrate avatar gender may not be a choice in some contexts for female players, such as multi-player games online, which have been described as toxic for those identifying themselves as females (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Each participant constructs this pressure to use a male avatar in terms of resultant outcomes; the experience of positive outcome such as "acceptance" (Billi) or avoiding negative outcomes such as "abuse" (Imogen).

It is worth noting here that avatar gender alone may not be sufficient to elicit the gendered harassment often experienced by women online. Below, Lauren talks about the importance of other cues such as username when she was playing online:

> *... I was like.. I'm not talking, because then they'll be like, oh it's a girl, for God's sake, she won't know what's going on, so I just like.. hid for ages and didn't let anyone know who I am. You have to make an ambiguous sort of name that doesn't reveal your gender as well, like Alex or Chris, so you could be a boy or a girl.*
>
> (Lauren)

By referring to perceptions that women in online games will not know "what's going on" Lauren shows evidence of an internalisation of the stereotype that 'girls can't play' observed by Kaye and Pennington (2016). Although choosing a male avatar may avoid other players making this assumption, Lauren also points to other signifiers of gender, such as username, that must be monitored online to avoid being targeted as a female player. Lauren's comments support arguments that communication style and other paralinguistic signifiers can allow one's gender to be determined online (Herring & Stoerger, 2013), suggesting that male

avatars are not be enough to avoid online harassment. However, the extracts from Billi and Imogen above suggest that choosing a male avatar is still often motivated by avoiding *perceived* negative consequences in online play.

Theme 2: "…why would you want to be a bigger girl when you've got the choice?" (Lauren)

When the women talked of contexts where they were less constrained by developer choice or perceived threats online, they talked about such choices in terms of fantasy and escapism:

> *I think that, when you're on* [sic] *a game you have a chance to be someone else. I know it sounds ridiculous but you have a chance to be someone who's maybe not you*. (Lauren)

Here, Lauren acknowledges uncomfortably ("it sounds ridiculous") that she uses her avatars to create something other than her 'real self'. This is consistent with findings that both men and women use avatar creation as an escape from their everyday lives by playing as multiple selves (Gilbert et al., 2014) or, as is the case in a third of gamers, even as members of another species or non-organic creature (Lin & Wang, 2014).

This escapism was constructed as a choice aimed at enhancing participants' gaming experience. Sloane, for example, constructs this ability to be something else as something which is "cool" and a choice made for her enjoyment:

> *Your character is something that you definitely… are not. So it's cool to experiment with those things*. (Sloane)

However, many of the participants also expressed the desire to change something about themselves during the creation process, usually to 'fix' perceived flaws:

> *And I went thinner rather than larger because that's me inserting myself into the fantasy of the character because that's not how I look, but it's how I might prefer to look? So it's a little bit of fantasy there.* (Alex)

Alex explicitly refers to giving her avatar a thinner body as a fantasy and here the implied fantasy is that of the Western 'thin ideal' (Grogan, 2016), supporting research demonstrating that players will sometimes choose to 'fix' perceived bodily flaws in their avatars' bodies (Dunn & Guadagno, 2012). Although one may expect that this would be more pronounced in women, due to arguments that women's bodies are subject to increased body surveillance compared to men (Dakanalis & Riva, 2013; Bordo, 2004), research has also shown that men with higher body dissatisfaction will choose an avatar which is more muscular than they are in real life (Cacioli & Mussap, 2014).

Some participants explicitly identified the influence of thinness on their avatar choices:

> *I chose a quite thin option, because I have, I guess… a pre-occupation with thinness for myself. I was always kind of pressured to be really thin and I guess the idealised version of me would be quite slender as a result.* (Amelia)

Although Amelia describes her decision to make her avatar thinner as a choice (she "chose" this option), she also refers to the pressure she feels to appear thin, acknowledging the tension present in her 'choice'. Women's use of choice when describing behaviour which is constrained by female appearance ideals is reflective of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007a) where women are motivated to construct themselves as autonomous beings responsible for their own actions. This neoliberal approach to the body results in engagement with bodily practices which objectify women along with an insistence that if they have freely chosen it, the practice is no longer problematic (Gill, 2007b).

So ubiquitous is the desire to adhere to norms for thinness that one of the participants even expressed confusion as to why one would fail to use this opportunity to adhere to these standards:

> *Like, you don't really get many sort of… bigger girls options. But then a lot of the time, why would you want to be a bigger girl when you've got the choice? Like, that's what a lot of people .. I'm guessing that's what they'd think, the game makers*. (Lauren)

Lauren not only refers to her choice *as a player* here, portraying the decision to make a thin avatar as self-evident, but also refers to the choice of the game *developers*. Lauren presents game developers as operating under the same societal expectations as herself, which is that the fantasy female gamers should wish to fulfil is that of finally meeting the appearance norms for women in their virtual selves which may elude them in 'real life'. This extract also points towards representation issues for women in larger bodies; where customisation options are limited, it is less likely that they will be able to play someone like them than thinner women.

Theme 3: "I don't want my character to be stereotypical" (Sloane)

In the previous themes women expressed wanting to be thinner in games than in real life, and how cultural stereotypes about the nature and abilities of women impacted on their choice to play as male or female online. When talking about playing as female characters, many of the participants rejected traditional feminine characteristics (identified by participants as make-up, perfectly coiffed hair, revealing clothing) for reasons ostensibly related to storyline, character personality and practicality in-game. Sloane describes avoiding stereotypes of women as 'princesses':

> *… if I'm playing with other people who will see the character, I don't want my character to be stereotypical and I don't want my character to be… a fairy princess. Don't get me wrong, I like fairy princesses in things about fairy princesses and things like that*. (Sloane)

Sloane here constructs fairy princesses as having their place – "in things about fairy princesses" - but rejects this highly stereotypically feminine look for other contexts. Young girls, in particular, are bombarded with images of 'princesses' in toys and media (England et al., 2011) and it has been argued that this has an impact on how women see themselves and their abilities (Sherman & Zubriggen, 2014). Sloan constructs her choice not to be fairy princess as a quest for individuality or 'not being stereotypical', but her choice is still constrained by consciously trying to *avoid* the stereotypes regarding how girls and women play.

Many of the women argued that the decision to make a female avatar which was not attractive was determined by the context of the game:

> *...when I was creating my Skyrim character, I had like, a clear idea of like, because I love playing as the elves and using archery and stuff like that, and I was like, this is going to be a hardened character who's seen the worst of the world and she's a bit austere and like, tough and stuff like that. But, to my shame, when I'm creating stuff like sims characters, I'm like… I want this person to look pretty (laughs) so it really depends on what kind of game I'm playing*. (Alex)

Alex constructs the decision to adhere to norms for feminine appearance in some contexts as shameful, even as she argues that it is a choice which is determined by game context. This rejection of femininity ostensibly caused by in-game constraints was seen in other extracts. For example, many of the participants were aware of the context of *Fallout 4* (an action adventure game to rescue the player's son in a post-apocalyptic future) and used the environment to justify their appearance decisions:

> *In games like this I think… if… if you were to do it in real life and you have to fight and stuff, you're going to get muddy, you're going to get dirty, I don't think makeup is going to really matter*. (Billi)

Billi acknowledges the constraints placed on her appearance choices, but focuses on *practical* constraints, mirroring justifications observed by women in other contexts. For example, girls in research by Duits and van Zoonen (2006) justified the wearing of sexualised clothing by referring to factors such as the weather, rather than the girls' existence in a social context where sexualisation of women is normalised and encouraged by a patriarchal society (Gill, 2007b).

Women players' gaming credentials are frequently called into question, and women (and other marginalised groups) are generally more reluctant to claim gamer identities (Shaw, 2012) than men, because they will be challenged on their gaming knowledge and experience (Sunden & Sveningsson, 2012). If women claim a gamer identity, they must prove to other (usually male) players that they are not a 'fake gamer girl'- a girl who pretends to game to attract men (Richard, 2016).

By distancing themselves from stereotypically feminine avatars and choices, and focusing on in-game characteristics, the women here may be attempting to establish their self-identity as a 'proper' gamer in a context where this identity is frequently subject to challenge for female players specifically.

Discussion

Summary of findings

In discussion of the avatars participants chose during the study, and the avatars they tended to choose in their everyday play, choice emerged as difficult to achieve in a social context – gaming culture – where women remain a marginalised group. Character design decisions were described as under the control of male developers, resulting in limited choice for women to see themselves in the character they played. Participants also perceived that the hostile context in which women play online effectively restricted choice of avatar gender in this context, with many female players opting to play as a male to "avoid abuse" (Imogen).

This is particularly interesting because none of the women talked about their own experiences, preferring to talk about perceived experiences of 'female gamers' in general, which provides an indication of a shared awareness of gaming as a hostile context for women even amongst women who may not play frequently online.

Where the women talked about the choices they *were* able to make in order to "be someone else" (Lauren), the extracts indicated that these choices were also constrained but in more subtle ways, as women both were drawn to and distanced themselves from Western beauty norms to be thin and feminine. The fantasy acted out with respect to body size was the Western fantasy of the thin ideal and even when women were experimenting by moving away from feminine appearance, the reasons they gave suggested that this was order to establish a positive gamer self-identity which rebelled against being seen as a 'fake girl gamer'.

Limitations and future directions

In allowing participants to use their own common-sense understandings of identification, immersion, and the distinctions between online and offline play, the scope of the paper could be considered limited. For example, when participants talked about the implications of online play for avatar choice, they tended to talk about their *perceptions* rather than their experiences. Whilst these negative perceptions provide a useful insight into why women may choose not to play online generally, these findings are limited in the extent to which they can provide information on the experiences of playing as different genders in this context (Cote, 2017; Fox & Tang, 2017).

The particular way in which some of the participants were sampled (for example, from a University) may have meant that the women in this study were well-informed about issues surrounding gender (one participant identified herself as a feminist) and therefore particularly motived to distance themselves from feminine stereotypes. They may also have been likely to be well-educated, and think more critically than other players about the media they consume.

In addition, intersectionality in female players requires more attention in future research examining avatar choices. Ethnicity and sexuality was not formally recorded in the present studies, so these issues could not be explored in detail. Further research is needed to explore avatar choice for women as gender interacts with gender identity, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Conclusions

In summary, this research provides a valuable addition to the research examining both avatar choices and female gamers' experiences. Our data suggests that the gamers we spoke to used avatars as a way to perform alternative identities and appearances, but that their choices were actually restricted in several ways as they tried to both reject and adhere to Western proscriptions for female appearance. These results show that even in fantasy where players can 'be someone else', gendered expectations may still find a way to dictate (virtual) appearance.

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